Sex, Scripture, and The Presbyterian Church

June 16, 1991
8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan
Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture: Colossians 3:12-17, Matthew 5:27-30, John 8:2-11

"You have heard that it was said . . . But I say to you . . . ."
-Matthew 5:27, 28 (NRSV)

I was tempted to put the sermon title on the Michigan Avenue bulletin boards and see what might happen. I resisted the temptation because we have learned some things recently about what happens when the church tries to transact its business and conduct its conversations in public. It has been an interesting time to be a Presbyterian minister. I am not alone among Presbyterians who have been asked by individuals in almost passing conversation and by television, radio and newspaper reporters for an opinion on a question of enormous complexity and found that it is simply not possible to do it in a small enough segment to squeeze into a TV sound byte. A friend of mine, a former Professor of Theology at one of our seminaries and now a pastor in Kansas, told me that when a TV reporter asked her opinion on the Presbyterian Human Sexuality Report, she asked in turn if the TV news program could accommodate everything she had to say because it would take her thirty minutes or so to explain her opinion. My opinion cannot be reduced to a sentence or two, she said, so if you can't guarantee me time for all of it, I don't have one.

CBS Evening News tried. The coverage a week ago Wednesday night on the national evening news used as its attention-getting motif, "Old-Time Religion versus the new sexual morality." A camera crew had been here the Sunday before and the segment began with the Fourth Church morning choir, as an example of Old-Time Religion. . . . now I know these people and I would not have thought that, frankly, and then cut directly to Madonna. Later the camera caught a conversation between a group of Fourth Church young adults and The Rev. Christine Chakoian. What happened next was appalling, but instructive. The Rev. Christine Chakoian had asked how the group felt about discussing sexual issues in church. One woman said something to the effect that she was delighted that the church is open and accessible on the topic. Some churches, she went on to observe, say "Homosexuality is wrong. Sex outside of marriage is wrong. Teen-age sex is wrong. That's it. Don't ask questions." She said this in an animated way. She went on to explain how different it was to be involved in a church where one encounters people with different opinions and life-styles and which is open to a diversity of people and opinions. The CBS editors lifted from her statement that single paragraph of negatives, which she said so animatedly, to illustrate the kind of church we are not — and used that segment to illustrate the point it had decided to make about old-time, reactionary religion. It was not only not close to accurate or truthful, it was exactly 180 degrees opposite from what she was saying. That's very sobering. It is also instructive.

We also learned that there is more general interest in what the church has to say about sexuality than about any other topic — war, crime, drugs, race. We have, simply, never been in the news as much as we have recently and the reason for that intense interest is itself a matter of major importance.

What the church thinks about and has to say about human sexual behavior is a matter of concern to a lot of people. Some feel very deeply about what the church should think and say. Many, many more are watching and listening carefully, and I believe openly, hoping for a word which is relevant, timely, helpful and faithful.

The topic itself is personal. Those of us who are talking about it today live on two sides of a major cultural revolution, an upheaval in public attitudes and behavior so huge that it is not unlike living in two different worlds. If you are my age or older, chances are you didn't talk about sex with your parents; sex education in public school meant a movie about venereal disease; your knowledge of human anatomy probably came from the Sears Catalog; couples kissed on screen and that's it: and there are words now used openly in casual conversation along Michigan Avenue which you did not hear said out loud, in mixed company, until you were in your thirties and which still cause you to flinch. If you live on the other side of the divide, your formative experience is very different. The only culture you know uses sex to sell beer and lawn mowers, (Coors Light and Anheuser Busch are outdoing each other to see who can be more graphically provocative in their marketing); sex before marriage is not only the statistical norm, but no one is much hiding it any longer. You know more and learned it earlier; and television, the dominant value shaper in your experience — not the church, your home or school, but television, has encouraged full sexual expression day-in and day-out all your lives. People my age used to have to hire a chaperone for a hayride and a housemother to prevent hanky-panky in the fraternity house. The raging moral debate today, according to the newspapers, is at what age it is appropriate to allow your teen-age daughter's boyfriend to sleep over.

People who live on my side of the divide, and those who don't but wish they did, sometimes believe that the way to cope with the new world we are living in is to hold on for dear life to what we always assumed were absolutes. Curiously, our actual behavior didn't turn out to be much different from yours, but sometimes we're convinced that something critical to our culture's health, to the future's viability, our religion's existence, is lost unless we can hold on to those absolutes.

And into this fray comes the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) which two years ago appointed a task force to study and make recommendations on the topic of human sexuality. By the way, all of the major denominations are, or will be, dealing with these issues in the near future. The report was released and published several months ago and it was acted on at the meeting of the church's General Assembly in Baltimore last week.

The report is 200 pages long. To summarize it fairly would take hours. Most people made up their minds about its recommendation without even reading or seeing it.

It says that we live in a patriarchal society and a patriarchal church, whose rules, morals and traditions were formulated by men, for men. It says that patriarchal structures are not fair.

It says that the moral criteria for sexual relations is something it calls "justice-love," not marriage or gender or orientation alone. It says that "justice-love" is scriptural.

It also recommends that the Presbyterian family discuss these matters for two years and then make some changes in the way it talks publicly, and teaches its young, and ordains its leaders; that it include in its rite of ordination people who are now not included ("self-affirming, practicing homosexuals").

The report was controversial, divisive and from the day it was published we have been discussing it in public. Some find it harsh and angry. Some think it is wonderful. Many conclude that its scholarship is ambitious and flawed and too political. 86 of our Presbyteries adopted overtures opposing the report before the General Assembly met. Our national offices in Louisville were inundated with thousands of letters. So many people ordered the Report that it qualifies for a place on the *New York Times* bestseller list.

From across the country several national campaigns were organized, funded and launched; a conservative organization solicited support and lobbied delegates to reject the report; liberal organizations advocated its adoption. There is a national organization, the Presbyterian Gay and Lesbian Caucus, which was obviously interested in the report's recommendations, particularly about ordination.

In the meantime I sensed that a broad but silent spectrum of Presbyterians, and non-Presbyterians, had begun to take notice, to watch and listen for what the church had to say: Presbyterians who happen to be gay, lesbian Presbyterians, single young adult Presbyterians, Presbyterian college students, Presbyterian parents, Presbyterians with AIDS, Presbyterian parents and grandparents and aunts and uncles of persons with AIDS.

The Presbyterian Church is a family which operates on the basis of Roberts Rules of Order. In Baltimore the family gathered, first to talk about the matter and then to make some difficult but necessary decisions. And now I must tell you about the process and it will be more than you wish to know. About an hour into the debate, the press became restless and some started to leave, eyes glazed over from substitute motions, amendments, amendments to amendments, points of order, calls for the question, all done decently and in order and with general Presbyterian courtesy. About three hours into the debate, the friend with whom I was sitting, an executive with our Board of Pensions, turned to me and said, "Well, we've done it again. The church can even make sex boring."

First, the 200-page report was examined, debated and discussed by a standing committee made up of 67 randomly selected commissioners. They held 12 hours of public hearings, listened to all the voices who wished to be heard debated, argued, consulted with experts in medicine and psychiatry and church order, refined, discussed and at 10:20 a.m. last Monday morning, brought the report to the floor of the Assembly Meeting in Baltimore's Convention Center, to a packed hall. The debate took all day.

The next morning the press announced, "Presbyterians Reject Report on Sex." That's not quite what happened. What the standing committee proposed and the Assembly did by a huge plurality was this. The Assembly decided to:

1. "Not adopt" the report on Human Sexuality, nor its recommendations, which is very different from rejecting it.

2. Dismiss the committee with thanks.

3. Request the Theology and Worship Unit to assistthe church in exploring the significant Biblical, theological, and ethical issues raised in the church around human sexuality during this past year and to use the Report, as well as a number of other documents as resources. The essence of that proposal is that the congregation, where the family lives most intimately, is the best place for the conversation to continue.

4. And in a rare gesture it ordered a pastoral letter to be sent immediately to every Presbyterian Church in the land.

The Session of Fourth Presbytyerian Church acted on Friday to provide copies this morning. The letter addresses the following matters:

> Our Presbyterian belief in Scripture as the authoritative word of God.
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> Our trust in the unconditional love of God for all persons.
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> Our affirmation that sexuality is a gift of God.
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> Our affirmation that the sanctity of the marriage covenant between one man and one woman is a God-given relationship to be lived out in fidelity.
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> An acknowledgement that the church still abides by its policies on ordination.

Finally, and this is a direct quote from the letter, "We reaffirm that the church is healthiest when it honors what we Presbyterians have always believed, as expressed in the "Historic Principles" of 1788: That God alone is Lord of the conscience, and. . . that there are truth. . . with respect to which people of deep faith may differ. This is an opportunity to learn again what it means to be Presbyterian."

So, the conversation will continue, as it should. The Presbyterian Church did not reject the report but carefully, deliberately chose words to say what it means. It did "not adopt" the Report. It referred the Report to a process of continuing conversations where it will be one of several resources. The Church decided at this time not to change its policies on who is ordained, but to abide by existing policies while the conversation continues. The church rejected efforts from the right and the left to either draw the circle closer by condemning and rejecting or to eliminate the circle altogether. The middle held by very large pluralities. It is not always clear in the middle. But it is a very Presbyterian place to be. . . .

Only a very brave or very foolish preacher would attempt to summarize what Scripture says about human sexuality in a single sermon. In fact, beware of sermons that claim to convey what the Bible says about sex. The Bible says a lot of different things and, as is often the case, it is possible to find a proof text for a number of different positions on every major behavioral question.

Jesus did not have a lot to say on the subject. Matthew, Mark, and Luke report that he said that a man who marries a divorced woman causes her to commit adultery. But almost all churches agree that this harsh position is not an absolute moral imperative, and that Jesus' high view of inviolable marriage was a radical and controversial departure from his own religious traditions which allowed a man to divorce a woman almost casually, and at one point mandated either divorce or polygamy if the woman did not bear children.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, sex outside of marriage is illegal — if the woman is married. It appears that the religious law is not much interested in sex between married men and unmarried women. Any sexual practice that does not propagate the race, increase the tribe, or that in any way threatens tribal culture is taboo. There are many prohibitions in the Old Testament, many of which were conditioned and shaped by the time, and many of which, we believe, have been superceded by the New Testament, although there is, and always has been, spirited debate about whether Jesus was interested in providing a new moral code to replace the old, or whether his message was a liberating gospel of forgiveness which puts the responsibility for making moral decisions squarely on each individual in each different situation.

Jesus didn't have much to say about sex. But one day, as he was teaching in the early morning, he was interrupted by the violent shouts of an unruly mob, dragging, pushing, shoving a woman right into the Temple where he was sitting. There were two witnesses who said they had caught her in the act of sexual intercourse. The man had somehow escaped, but she, married, was guilty — adultery. The Scripture could not be more clear. She was to die and the method of execution used in the first century was stoning.

It was a lynch mob and they were on their way to carry out the religiously mandated punishment. Why they stopped to talk with him no one knows. John suggests they hoped to catch him up, humiliate him whom they passionately feared.... "What are you going to do about this one, Rabbi, caught in the act and you know as well as we what the law says? What does your love and acceptance say about adultery?"

And Jesus looked at them; so sure of themselves; so intent on preserving the morality of the community; so determined not to accommodate to the loose, secular permissiveness of Rome; so sure they knew the mind of God; and he looked at her, hysterical, terrified, moments away from an excrutiating death, she who just a while ago was in the embrace of a man. Who knows why she did what she did; broke a basic moral law, decided to risk everything — her marriage, family, children, reputation, her life — for a moment of love. And then he did something strange. He bent and drew something in the dust. Again we don't know what. I believe he was thinking and that what he drew was just a tracing in the dirt while he was experiencing disgust at the self-righteousness of these religious men and anger at what religion, which begins with a loving God, can become and revulsion at what was about to happen to a child of God.

He straightened up, looked at them with what I imagine was a withering directness, and said, "Let the one without sin throw the first stone." And he went back to his tracing in the dust. One of the older men — wiser, a Temple official — saw for a moment the truth of God in this peculiar Rabbi and simply turned around and walked away. Another, dropped the rock he still clutched in his hand and followed. And then another and another and another until they were all gone.

He looked up again at her, now alone, and I think, with a little sarcasm, maybe a twinkle in his eye, he said, "Where did they go? Has no one condemned you?" No sir. "Neither do I," he said. "Go your way — go back to your home – your children – your husband – your life — pick up the pieces. Don't do this again."

That moment — is what the church is supposed to be. The sanctity of marriage is not demeaned by what he did, nor denied, but upheld. God's law is honored. Jesus does not condone adultery, but clearly his priority is life, not death, redemption, not rejection. Given an opportunity to say a clear word about morality, the word he chooses to say is mercy. It is a moment of grace and that's what his church should be: a place where above all and before all and after all we know about God's unconditional love and forgiveness and healing.

Church is the people, who when they gather weekly, praise God and then confess their sins, confess to the creator and to one another that we are not perfect, not a one of us; that we are sometimes intentional and sometimes unintentional sinners; that we live by grace and forgiveness and forbearance and love. And we confess it out loud so that God is not the only one hearing the truth about us, but our neighbors hear it also — hear that we know the truth about ourselves, that not one of us has the right to throw the first stone.

Church is where the stones start to drop from our hands as we learn compassion instead of condemnation, grace not judgment.

Church is where people who know who they are and who Jesus Christ is, take one another seriously and hear, with respect and love, the questions of teen-agers about their sexuality never asked directly of course; and with respect and compassion born of our mutuality in the grace of Christ, hear the dilemma of young adults, not married, but wondering if there is a word about faithfulness and integrity and responsibility; and the questions of homosexual people who did not choose to be who they are anymore than heterosexuals choose to be who they are, about what it means to be faithful and honest and responsible.

Church should be the refuge where the issues may be discussed in an atmosphere of respect, where each can look for guidelines — not rules — where the complexity of the world is appreciated and the freedom of the individual in the love of Christ is alway affirmed.

At 5:30 p.m. last Monday, the General Assembly concluded the matter of the report on Human Sexuality. There was relief, a giddy sense that the body had not self-destructed, some laughter and even scattered applause. The Moderator, Herb Valentine, a Presbytery Executive from Baltimore, an urban pastor I have known for twenty-five years, rapped the gavel. "There are brothers and sisters, sons and daughters who are in deep pain about what we have done," he said. "They are loyal Presbyterians. They are members and officers and ministers. They are gay and lesbian Presbyterians and their families. I have invited them to say their word and they have asked to say it silently and I have agreed. They wish to walk among us and I invite them and any who wish to walk with them to do so." The hall became absolutely silent. Three hundred people, gays, lesbians, their parents, men in jeans and tee shirts, and pin-stripes and button-down collars, women in slacks and power suits, people with AIDS. The person standing beside me pointed to a well-dressed, middle-aged man and woman holding hands, weeping openly, their son recently dead. Some commissioners rose and joined the silent word. The 300 fanned out and surrounded the commissioners' tables and sang quietly a song about acceptance and grace and freedom and the love of Jesus.

And so among us today, and every day, is a marvelous diversity of people, each one of us at a different place on our journey, some of us in deep pain, some of us in guilt, some of us wishing we were not who we are, some of us happy to be who we are, some of us struggling with our opinions and beliefs, not sure what we believe about these matters, all of us here because we trust a remarkable suggestion that God loves us, that we are children of God, that God's son does not condemn us, but offers forgiveness and healing and change and restoration and grace.

So this church, part of that Presbyterian family which lives under the authority of Scripture and also in dialogue with the world about us, lives by the grace of Jesus Christ, and will continue to be what it has been — a family of people who know who they are, who confess their sin together and celebrate the goodness of God's love, a place where all are welcome and included and affirmed and upheld, and respected and supported, as each struggles to find ways to live honestly and responsibly and faithfully.

Amen.

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (USA)

OFFICE OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

JAMES E. ANDREWS
STATED CLERK

HERBERT D. VALENTINE
MODERATOR, 203RD GENERAL ASSEMBLY

June 11, 1991

Dear Members and Friends:

We, the commissioners and advisory delegates to the 203rd General Assembly, write you out of pastoral care for our church.

We have acted on a number of important matters. None, however, has drawn more attention than human sexuality. We write to communicate our actions and to offer a pastoral word for our church.

We have not adopted the special committee's Majority Report and recommendations, nor have we adopted its Minority Report. We have dismissed the special committee with thanks for their work, and with regret for the cruelties its members have suffered.

We have reaffirmed in no uncertain terms the authority of the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. We have strongly reaffirmed the sanctity of the marriage covenant between one man and one woman to be a God-given relationship to be honored by marital fidelity. We continue to abide by the 1978 and 1979 positions of the Presbyterian church on homosexuality.

We are also convinced that the issues raised again by this report will not go away. Though human sexuality is a good gift of God, we and our families are in pain. We are being torn apart by issues of the sexuality and practice of adults: single, married, and divorced; teenage sexuality and practice, sexual violence, clergy sexual misconduct, new reproductive technologies, AIDS, sexually transmitted diseases, and the sexual needs of singles, gay and lesbian persons, the disabled, and older adults.

That pain was felt by us here in Baltimore, expressed by people of very different perspectives. Some of these are issues on which there is considerable theological and ethical disagreement within the church.

We also believe that at the heart of the recent debate lies a painful distrust of the General Assembly by many of our members. Often the General Assembly has been perceived as telling individual members what to think. Let it be said that in Baltimore the 203rd General Assembly (1991) heard the cry of the church for an Assembly that listens to the grass roots. In that spirit, we have instructed the Theology and Worship Ministry Unit of the General Assembly Council to prepare a plan to encourage us as Presbyterians in our theological and ethical decision-making We reaffirm that the church is healthiest when it honors what we Presbyterians have always believed, as expressed in the "Historic Principles" of 1788: That God alone is Lord of the conscience, and has left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men and women which are in anything contrary to

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God's Word, or beside it, in matters of faith and worship; and also that there are truths and forms with respect to which people of deep faith may differ (G1.0300). This is an opportunity to learn again what it means to be Presbyterian.

In conclusion, we wish to reaffirm that we are all one as Christ's body and while we are diverse, we are one family of faith because of the unconditional love of God for all persons. We welcome your response to our action as we rejoin you this next Sunday. May the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ keep us and bless us in the Spirit of divine grace and love.

Yours in Christ,

Herbert D. Valentine
Moderator,
203rd General Assembly

James E. Andrews
Stated Clerk

Gordon C. Stewart
Moderator, General
Assembly Committee
on Human Sexuality